

The September Antlerless Deer Gun Season

In 1986, North Dakota Game and Fish Department administrators for the first time established a special antlerless deer season that allowed hunters to have more than one deer gun license in the same year.

For the most part, this was a good sign. It meant that the state's deer population had reached a level that could provide a license to pretty much everyone who had an interest in hunting deer, even though the license might not have been the hunter's first choice of deer type or unit.

At that time, the total deer gun license allocation was 89,000. This year, the number of deer licenses available is just under 150,000, a new record.

Over the last 22 years, the number of individuals who hunt deer in the state has increased as well, from about 80,000 to more than 100,000; but that hasn't been enough to keep pace with a rising deer population without the opportunity for individual hunters to have multiple licenses.

From 1986 through 2000, in most years in at least some units, hunters could get a second antlerless deer license. In 2001 and 2002, third licenses were available in some units. Four licenses were possible in 2003, and then in 2004 the limit on the number of deer licenses a hunter could have was removed entirely.

As the number of licenses offered continued to climb, most hunters interested in having more than one were satisfied, and yet some units still had licenses remaining when deer season started. The Game and Fish Department was interested in having those licenses issued, not so much because of the extra revenue they generate, but because of the level of harvest necessary to maintain or reduce the deer population in a specific unit.

For instance, if a unit had 1,000 antlerless licenses available and only 700 were issued, the harvest would likely not be high enough and the deer population would likely increase.

To increase interest, other provisions were added to make these additional licenses valid and available during the bow and muzzleloader seasons.

For the most part, these extended opportunities and conveniences helped keep licenses issued on pace with license availability. If deer and hunters were all distributed evenly across the state, that would probably still be the case. But some areas have higher deer densities than others, and perhaps not enough available hunters. That seems to be the case in units 2C and 2D in northeastern North Dakota.

Both units have deer populations that are higher than Department biologists and many area residents would like to see, despite nearly annual increases in antlerless deer licenses.

However, there comes a point where simply offering more licenses isn't effective. If the pool of available hunters stays the same, and pretty much all of them are already satisfied with their opportunities, it doesn't matter how many more licenses you offer, the potential for issuing those licenses doesn't increase accordingly.

For instance, in unit 2C in 2006, Game and Fish made 7,500 antlerless licenses available to hunters, and all were issued.

An estimated 5,529 deer were actually harvested. Population indices suggested stable to increasing deer numbers in 2C, so last year the number of antlerless deer licenses was bumped up to 8,000. By the end of the 2007 hunting season 395 antlerless deer licenses remained unissued, and even with more total antlerless licenses issued than the year before, the estimated harvest declined to 4,933.

The deer population, however, went up. This year, 9,000 antlerless licenses are available in unit 2C. That's 1,000 more whitetail doe licenses than in any other unit in the state. Taking into account past license application and hunting patterns, it seemed unlikely that simply issuing multiple licenses would yield a different result than in previous years.

Over the winter Game and Fish administrators started to consider other options. One of those options was an additional week of hunting – in units 2C and 2D only – for antlerless deer in September. Game and Fish brought the proposal out

for public comment during the spring round of district advisory board meetings in April.

Response was not overwhelmingly positive or negative, but the proposal did generate many questions. Some of those questions are highlighted below.

What are the details of the September season?

In units 2C and 2D only, the September season will allow harvest of any antlerless deer with any legal firearm or bow, including centerfire and muzzleloading rifles, from Friday, September 26 at noon through Thursday, October 2.

Why not have the doe season later in the fall?

That has been tried in the past. Due to severe weather conditions during opening weekend of the 2004 regular deer gun season, a special season for antlerless white-tailed deer was held the last two weeks of December in much of the state. The Department received numerous complaints about that season. Game and Fish is hoping that hunters will be more inclined to harvest additional antlerless deer for meat at a time of year when they do not already have another in the freezer, and are not preoccupied with trying to shoot a buck.

Another potential draw for a September season is that people won't be burned out from two weeks of hunting during the deer gun season. They may enjoy a couple of days hunting for does in early fall, then still anxiously anticipate the regular season that starts five weeks later.

It can still be warm weather that time of year. Won't the meat just spoil?

It usually is warmer in late September than in early November, but several big game archery and gun seasons are already open in September. Hunters will need to adjust their hunting practices, bring ice coolers and process their deer quickly.



Some crops will still be in the field, the sugar beet harvest will be underway, and cattle will still be at pasture. Will landowners allow hunting this time of the year?

During the regular deer gun season some crops (sunflowers and corn) are still not harvested, and cattle are also often still out to pasture. Hunters will need to adjust and make contacts with landowners earlier in the fall.

Have other states tried this sort of season before?

Yes, Minnesota and Wisconsin are two Midwestern states that have established special antlerless deer seasons prior to their regular deer seasons, and they have been pleased with the results.

Will bowhunters have to wear orange while archery hunting in 2C and 2D during this September season?

Yes.

Will youth season license holders be allowed to hunt during the September antlerless season?

No, the special youth license will not be valid this year during the September antlerless season. However, young hunters can purchase a concurrent season antlerless license specifically for units 2C and/or 2D so they can hunt during the September season.

It is important to remember that the statewide youth deer license (the youth season in September 12-21 this year) is only available to a first-time deer hunter. Eligible young hunters should make sure they purchase the youth season license first before buying an additional antlerless license that would allow them to hunt during the special September season.

Much of the land along the Red River and other areas in these units is posted to hunting. Some of these landowners feed and attract deer with bait so the deer are highly concentrated on specific properties. Will those landowners be willing to let hunters on to hunt does and risk scaring away the bucks?

Game and Fish has noticed a dramatic increase in the number of gratis licenses issued since 1998 in 2C (371 to 791) and 2D (77 to 189). Much of the private land in these units is posted, and feeding and hunting deer over bait is occurring in some areas. This issue may be a factor in why it has been difficult to maintain control of the deer population.

Having a season open in September allows additional harvest of antlerless deer, while still leaving plenty of time for deer to settle down again before the regular season. If landowners in these hunting units work with Game and Fish and allow additional hunting access, there is a better chance that landowner concerns of high deer populations can be addressed.



Game and Fish managers believe that a special experimental September season for gun hunters may be an efficient way to help reduce deer numbers. Once deer numbers are back within management objectives, or if the September season is not effective, the Department will maintain deer numbers using traditional season structures or other alternatives.

Following are excerpts from comments Game and Fish has received since the September doe season was proposed,
From Both Sides:

One Side

- I was very glad to hear there may be an early fall hunting season in northeastern ND ... we have far too many deer in our area ... and it is a nightmare driving in this area. Planting fruit trees and a garden are also next to impossible, they just wipe everything out. In any case hopefully an additional hunting season will do some good.
- I feel that the extra doe season is a good idea. However, I think it would be better if it was held the following week after bow season ends. I realize there are pros and cons to both time frames. I think that if it is held after bow season more landowners would be willing to allow people on their land because you won't be disturbing "their big buck." I think that no matter when the season happens it would be positive.
- I live in Neche, right on the border between 2C and 2D, so I'm fairly interested in this proposed season! I think this new season is a great idea for that time of year, and by then my freezer will no doubt be empty.
- It's about time your department realized that this area (2C) was grossly overpopulated with deer. Our farm will be open to hunting ... I hope the September hunters will be very respectful of unharvested crop. All our dry beans, corn and sunflowers will still be standing at this time. Thank you for making an effort to get the deer population under control.

The Other Side

- I personally feel that an early rifle season in September is going to be more dangerous simply for the fact that a lot more farmers will be in the fields, and a lot more other hunters will be out due to all the various game seasons in progress. Also at this time of the year a lot of landowners are not going to allow access. Later in the year they are more willing to allow access, especially after the main deer rifle season has ended.
- Another typical blunder by the brains of the n.d.g&f. Don't think of doing it.
- As a landowner, farmer and deer hunter in unit 2C, I agree that there should be a special doe season. I think the time of year has to be reconsidered. Cattle producers still have their herds in pastures at that time of the year and the brushy draws act as deer holding areas. The leaves are still on the trees making it difficult to distinguish if it's deer (buck or doe) or cattle. Crops will still be standing waiting to be harvested and hay hauled off the land. The last thing I need is high powered rifle fire when doing these jobs ... I think waterfowl hunters won't appreciate rifle fire while hunting sloughs and cattail areas.
- I would be strongly opposed to a doe season for our unit in September. This would make it hard for the bowhunters if people were out there with guns. The fawns would be too small to be left alone. We have people who bow hunt on our land and we would not let any deer hunters in at this time.

What do you think? To pass along your comments, send us an e-mail at ndgf@nd.gov; call us at 701-328-6300; or write North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, ND 58501.